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THE PARSON-POETS

BY S. G. TALLENTYRE

“HAVE you seen Trench’s new volume?” wrote Blakesley to Lord Houghton in 1838. “Here we all think the clergyman has swallowed up the poet.”

In the case of Herrick, the Love-poet, and of Thomas Ingoldsby, the Humorist, the poet has swallowed up the clergyman; while with George Herbert, the Saint, the quaint piety of the matter is so exquisitely interwoven with the quaint, sweet music of the manner that one knows not if it be words or melody which have touched the soul.

Robert Herrick was born when the great Elizabethans still filled her spacious times with melody, and son of one Cheapside tradesman though he was and nephew and apprentice of another, lisped in numbers from the first.

He was twenty-two when, in 1613, he became a gentleman commoner of St. John’s College, Cambridge, and began writing annual excitable letters to his “most carefull uncle” for ten pounds to buy books. He devised even more ways of spelling his own name in the signature of these letters than he presently devised methods of pronouncing Julia to suit the exigencies of his verse.

He was about nine and twenty—with curly black hair, coarse jaw, and a very prominent hook nose like a Roman emperor’s, if one can trust a portrait of the epoch—when he returned to London and, at what he himself called

“those Lyrick Feasts made at the Sun,
“The Dog, the Triple Tunne,”

met “rare Ben Jonson,” and many of Ben’s contemporaries and inferiors. Young Robert knew very well which were the inferiors and was stanch to his devotion to Ben to the end of his life, always filling—it is to be hoped, usually metaphorically—“mighty Bowles up to the brim” that

he might drink to his "Jonson's soule"; and providing his divinity with a niche—also metaphorical—in his church of Dean Prior:

"Candles I'll give to thee
And a new Altar;
And thou, Saint Ben, shalt be
Writ in my Psalter."

The poets a poet reverences form a very good indication of the sort of poet he is himself. Herrick indeed knew the best when he saw it, in his own Muse as in other men's; through his poems runs the strong assurance, which is never conceit, that his music, to which for two hundred years scarcely any one attended, rang true and "the day would come when men would hear him."

In 1627, when he was not far short of forty years old, he took orders, and as military chaplain accompanied the Duke of Buckingham on the ill-fated expedition to the Isle de Rhé. Two years later he was appointed to the living of Dean Prior, in a small, deep valley under Dartmoor.

No one seems to know the reason of these steps, or of his not taking some others before him. He says himself he was not ordained for the loaves and fishes. He loved London, and addressed his new county as "lothèd Devonshire." One cannot look in his face, or think of the life of wit and wine in which he had delighted in the metropolis, and believe that nature had designed him for a country incumbency. But he started with at least good resolutions. There is an "Ode Upon Parting" in which he takes leave of the lusts of flesh and fame, and a "Farewell Unto Poetry"—that is, all poetry save the "Noble Numbers" of sacred song. He hired an old servant, Prue, or Prew, "my dearest maid"; he surrounded himself with pet animals; and to the pleasures of his new office—the junketings and wassails, May-day fêtes—he attended with immense zest and regularity.

Of his performance of his duties hardly anything is known except that the "oldest inhabitant" said he once threw his sermon at the congregation when he saw they were not attending to it. Once again, "look in his face"—with that determined, protruding eye—"and you'll" believe "it all."

Then he settled down for eighteen years and, Farewells not being of necessity eternal and nature and inspiration being very strong, was first Herrick the Poet and, a great way after, Herrick the Parson.

Whether or no he can be said to be one of the most perfect of English lyrists, at least no lyrist ever interpreted more beautifully the laughter of love who knew nothing of its pangs and its tears.

Robert Herrick touched only the lighter chords in the great gamut of human feeling—and touched them exquisitely. Whether his Julia was Heaven's invention or only Herrick's, one can still see her with her complexion of milk and roses, lustrous dark eyes, hair sparkling with dew

“Dew sate on Julia's haire
And spangled, too,”

or “bundled up in a golden net”; and those warm, full charms a Herrick must needs adore. The “Lawnie Films” and “Airie Silks,” filled with all the perfumes of Araby; the roses at her breast, the black ribbon floating across a fair arm, the first and last poet who made clothes poetic has described with a naïveté which is not the least of his delights.

Many of his poems are like a Watteau picture—only Watteau's models were the court ladies playing at rusticity and Herrick's are more often the country girls with Devonshire air and damp the only paint their cheeks knew, and with a background not of Versailles, but of a vicarage garden full of blossoms.

In that naïveté he is the Pepys of poetry. When he declared of his mistress

“Be she bald, or does she weare
Locks incurld of other haire,
I shall find enchantment there”

Parson Herrick was not at all indulging in a jibe at her expense: he was saying what he thought like a child.

So in his religious poems—it must be confessed the Vicar of Dean Prior continued to be more at home in the exquisite epicureanism of the “Hesperides” than in “Noble Numbers”—he expresses simple facts in simple words without the slightest intention of irreverence. In that beautiful “Litanie to the Holy Spirit,” at such verses as

“When the artless Doctor sees
No one hope but of his Fees,
And his Skill runs on the lees,
Sweet Spirit comfort me!”

the reader may smile, but the writer did not.

His epigrams have the naïveté in a less desirable form: they are the boy—and the boy of a very coarse age—in a passion. One fancies Parson Herrick put into them something of his disgust with a country life and parish vexations, and punished his neighbors for being so dull.

And in a moment the same pen and heart turned to write one of the familiar masterpieces of grace and literature, "To Daisies, Not to Shut so Soon"; "The Night-piece to Julia"; or the two perfect, less-known verses "To Electra":

"I dare not ask a kisse,
I dare not beg a smile,
Lest having that, or this,
I might grow proud the while.

"No, no, the utmost share
Of my desire shall be
Only to kisse that Aire
That lately kissèd Thee."

It is a high testimony to Herrick as a poet that so many of his poems have been set to music; but, after all, few need such a setting—they are immortal music already.

Here and there, but seldom, there are stanzas which bear testimony to the fact that he was aware while he was snug in his Devonshire parsonage with his Prew, his spaniel, his cat, and his lamb, thrones and kingdoms were passing away. For himself he very well knew, in his own words:

"Live by thy Muse thou shalt

When Monarchies trans-shifted are and gone,
Here shall endure thy vast dominion."

He calmly produced his "Hesperides" in the great warring of nations three months before Charles I. was beheaded.

In 1647, as a good Royalist, he was ejected from Dean Prior; came back, not at all ill-pleased, "to the blest place of my Nativitie," and refuged in poor lodgings in Westminster.

Jonson was dead; the spirit of the age was the spirit of Puritanism—not at all congenial to Parson Herrick, who still enjoyed, one fancies, his "Boules with Sack replete," and wooed, one knows, a muse not austere. But he was of the disposition which could ever say to fortune:

"Tumble me down, and I will sit
Upon my ruines (smiling yet);
Teare me to tatters; yet I'll be
Patient in my necessitie."

In 1662 came the turn of the wheel. The parson of Dean Prior was reinstated in his cure. He was then seventy-one years old. Old Prew survived him. To be sure—taking time by the forelock—he wrote her epitaph thirty years before her death. He wrote other epitaphs, tender and graceful, but never evincing the deeper feelings which were his lack.

He died at eighty-three and was buried at Dean Prior as "Robert Herrick, Vicker," on October 15th, 1674; and "Robert Herrick, Vicker," he remained till 1796, when "Sylvanus Urban" of "The Gentleman's Magazine" resuscitated a poet.

George Herbert, who was born in 1593, was at Cambridge at the same time as Herrick, but they do not appear to have met—fortunately, as they would have been very uncongenial.

Herbert had the advantage to belong to a good old family, and the greater advantage—it must be advantageous, for such mothers' sons nearly always turn out well—to be one of the seven boys brought up by a devout widowed mother. One of the seven was Lord Herbert of Cherbury.

According to Izaak Walton, even at Westminster School the beauties of George's "pretty behaviour and wit shined," and he seemed "marked out to become the care of Heaven."

Not too easily, however. At Cambridge he was wit, scholar, gentleman; in 1619, Public Orator; of the world and in it; assiduous in attendance on His Majesty King James I. when he came to neighboring Royston to hunt; had, in fact, high hopes of court preferment, "a genteel humour for clothes" and no little pride of his noble birth; while Lord Herbert of Cherbury mentions fraternally that George had also the family hot temper.

Then James I. died, and, says a biographer, "disappointed ambition made Herbert a saint."

No! For there had long been in him a great struggle of the soul—the desire, but not the strength, to come apart from "the ways of Pleasures, the sweet strains, the lullings and the relishes of it," to a better and obscurer destiny. By 1626 he had been ordained deacon, but took up no clerical work. A few years later he retreated into Kent for long thought and solitude; went through, in his own words, "such spiritual conflicts as none can think but have endured them." At last

"Methought I heard one calling 'Childe';
And I reply'd 'My Lord.'"

He accepted the little living of Bemerton, near Salisbury, in 1630—it consisted of a few cottages and a population of about one hundred and twenty souls. Before he died there—only three years later—he had done his life's work, and left his "deare Mother," the British Church, her noblest heritage of verse.

George Herbert, as poet and man, has many surely of the qualities which he loved in that Mother—her sobriety, which is not austerity; her large comprehension of the necessities and failings of human nature, her gentle dignity, and her sound reasonableness. Herbert as parson or poet did not hope to turn his people into angels: only into good men and women. His poems are always true to human nature, and so are true art. Yet he had also an exquisite feeling for lyric style; while, as for the quips, cranks, and oddities which were the poetical characteristics of the age, one can hardly dream his poetry without them, and one loves him for them.

No better compliment has ever been paid to his verse than its neglect by the eighteenth century—which was busily engaged in petting Pope, Shenstone, and Cowley—and that Cowper, in the awful melancholy of disordered reason, declared that though he did not find in Herbert a cure for his malady, "yet it never seemed so much alleviated as while I was reading him."

Is every one now always so confident and sanguine that he has no need of the calm, quaint beauty and common-sense of "The Discharge," for instance, which advances Herbert's reasons against worrying over the future?

"Raise not thy mudde
Of future depths, but drink the cleare and goode:
Dig not for wo
In times to come, for it will grow.

God chains the dog till night: wilt loose the chain
And wake thy sorrow?
Wilt thou forestall it, and now grieve to-morrow,
And then again
Grieve freshly over all thy pain?

"Either grief will not come, or if it must
Do not forecast;
While it cometh, it is almost past,
Away, distrust;
My God hath promis'd: He is just."

entious, and which gave him the time and, in the friends it brought him, the impetus to his other occupation. He made his happy marriage in 1814. He was upset out of a gig a few years later, and in the enforced idleness of recovery from the accident first became a writer.

Was it not part of his good luck that for his earliest literary effort—*Baldwin*, an uncommonly bad novel—he got £20 down, with hopes of more to follow, dependent, indeed, on those “publishing contingencies” which Theodore Hook used to describe as *things that never happen*?

Next, coming to town to consult a doctor on behalf of one of his children, he met a friend about to drop a letter in the post suggesting to a young clergyman that he should stand for a vacant minor canonry of St. Paul’s Cathedral. Barham was just in time to prevent the letter being sent. “Why shouldn’t *I* stand instead?” He did, was successful, and found himself in the most cheery, interesting and intellectual clerical milieu in England.

But the first and best of “Thomas Ingoldsby’s” claims to be a lucky man has not been mentioned. Like Hume and Mr. Micawber, he was born with “an irresistible tendency to seize on a cheering reflection,” a disposition which Hume rightly estimated as better worth having than ten thousand a year.

The expression of his face—stout, lively, vivacious, with its sensible, impulsive look—makes one feel happier for the sight of it; and the record of that social, clerical, literary life in London of the ’thirties inspires the reader with something of the pleasant *bonhomie* which inspired it.

In those days Copleston of Llandaff was Dean of St. Paul’s; one of its canons was Dr. Blomberg, fiddler and foster-brother of King George IV., and another, Dr. Hughes, the friend of Walter Scott and the husband of a wife who attracted many literary lights to dark Amen Corner, and, if it be the office of a friend to make one do what one can, was one of the best Barham ever had.

Presently Sidney Smith was appointed to a vacant canonry and one of those substantial, well-built houses in the Corner—Sidney Smith, wit, Whig, and reformer; wanting, if you please, to make reforms in the goodly body of minor canons, who naturally felt themselves entirely satisfactory as they were.

Barham was a mellow Tory of the old school—the “rad-

icalish tone " about *Oliver Twist*, for instance, quite disturbed him. Lord Houghton hints that between him and the greater wit and canon jealousy subsisted. Well, anyhow, the green-eyed monster was not very monstrous. Wit and humorist met perpetually at the most friendly dinner parties in that agreeable and unusually large-minded Close.

To Barham's own table came very often Luttrell, of the *Advice to Julia*, convulsing the company with his epigrams; or Barham's school-friend, Hook, improvised for an hour at the minor-canonical piano. Constantly Barham dined with one of the city companies—he was chaplain to the Vintners and it was among his duties to visit the almshouses of that company at Mile End, where he settled with an admirable wisdom, humor, and patience the differences of the twelve old lady inhabitants—who, of course, *had* to quarrel *pour passer le temps*.

In 1824 he had been made Priest in Ordinary to the Chapel Royal, held with his minor canonry the living of St. Mary Magdalene and St. Gregory by St. Paul's, and performed the then not onerous duties of both offices briskly and satisfactorily. At home he was surely the most delightful father in the world, always good for a joke or a ghost story, and without an iota of that awful stand-offishness then thought necessary to maintain parental dignity.

He lost five of his children in their very early lives. No father could have been more warmly affectionate, but his sanguine and his unselfish temperament rebounded even after grief so crushing; and then Mrs. Hughes impelled him to his destiny.

Unknown to the author she sent to *Blackwood's Magazine* the unfinished MS. of his second novel, *Cousin Nicholas*. The appearance of the first chapter obliged him to think of a last.

Three years later there began to appear, in *Bentley's Miscellany*, *The Ingoldsby Legends*.

Nothing ages so quickly as humor, and the wit which made our fathers cry with laughter often bores their sons to tears of another description. The wit of "Ingoldsby" certainly lacks delicacy, subtlety and *finesse*. But its loud, frank laugh rings—and may ring forever—jolly and true; the redundant, bubbling, farcical wit—the wit which absolutely *had* to let off steam—has in it something which compels one to laughter, though one had decided not to be

amused, and is an admirable picture of the humor of the time in which it was written. Here and there, too, though rarely, there are not wanting signs that to this frolicsome and easy versifier was not denied the last, best gift of the humorist—the gift of tears.

To stay the jest because what seems ludicrous to oneself may be deeply serious to other people was a refinement of sentiment not common in the 'thirties. Barham certainly only intended, when he wrote his broad satire on Rome, to laugh folly and imposture out of court, and would have been astonished and hurt at the suggestion of offense. But in his last days—"As I laye a-Thynkynge, a-Thynkynge"—the idea that he might have given pain where he had meant only to provoke mirth occurred to trouble the kindest heart in the world.

His youngest boy died in the cholera epidemic of 1840, and a year later his friend Hook. From such losses even his elastic spirits could hardly recover. He died in 1845, having left to English literature a work which, whatever its merits, and they are many, and whatever its defects and limitations, and they are not a few, is of its kind unique.

One sees Herrick's muse as the loveliest of country girls, with her arms heaped with flowers, "cloathes" that "are conspirators" to aid her charms, whispering her amorous message in her parson's ear; Herbert's Muse has something of the naïve and grave-eyed simplicity of a child-saint listening, rapt and innocent, for a heavenly music; and with Barham one sees no Muse at all, but always the white-tied, sensible, round-faced parson himself, with the easy jokes running off the end of his pen, not all unlike the good and jolly monks he depicted with such a rollicking good humor, and always a man and a brother.

S. G. TALLENTYRE.